

# VE Day at a POW Camp in England

(The author, Sam Hudson of Plymouth, served with Gen. George Patton's Third Army in France, was wounded in Alsace-Lorraine, and was assigned as commander of a prisoner-of-war camp in Newbury, England. The article about his experiences was written to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Victory in Europe (VE) Day.)

going back to the nickleodeon. I had visions of sickly prisoners building trap doors and tunnels and going over the hill in droves. With me left holding the bag.

For a brief moment — but only a moment — I toyed with the idea of asking to be sent back to combat.

Quickly rejecting that foolishness, I set out for Newbury.

NEWBURY IS a small town, about 60 miles southwest of London on the London to Bath road.

During the English Civil War, in the 1600s when Oliver Cromwell came to power, Newbury was the site of two battles between the Roundheads and the Cavaliers.

Newbury also is known as the home of the Newbury Race Track, one of the largest horse tracks in Britain.

That's where I was headed for — the Newbury Race Track had been converted into a U.S. Army depot. All kinds of supplies were stored there prior to being shipped to the front on the continent.

The workers at the depot had been American GI or English civilians. As we worked more and more Germans, the U.S. Army used them to replace the allied personnel.

The stables, near the track, had been converted into a stockade to house the prisoners. Some of the Germans slept four to a stall. The balance slept in pyramidal tents.

The camp was enclosed with a double ring of barbed-wire fences. Concrete wire was rolled up between the inner and outer ring.

Guard towers, located at each corner, were equipped with powerful searchlights. The towers were manned by American GI's equipped with M-1 rifles.

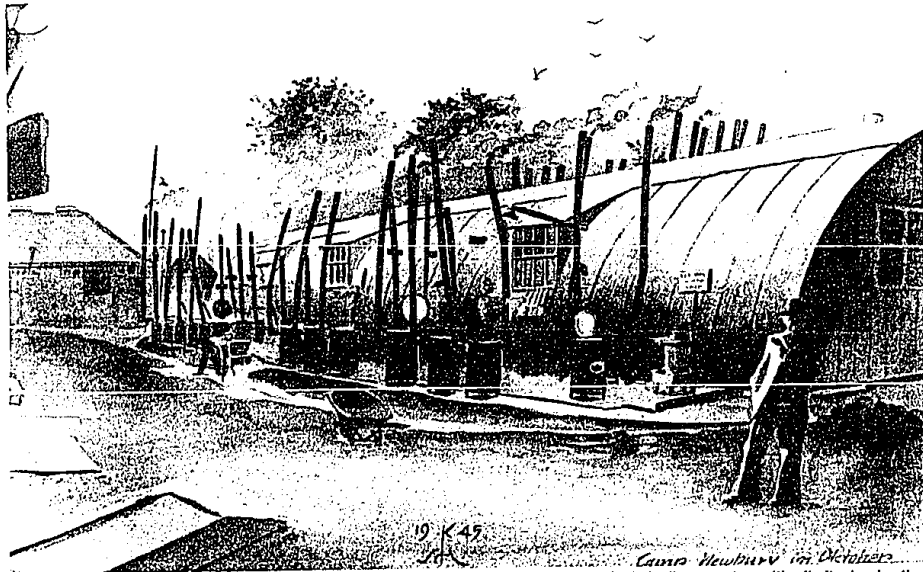
The orderly room of the camp commander was inside the stockade. The day I arrived at the gate, the corporal of the guard called the orderly room. The officer I was to replace came out to meet me.

He was also a first lieutenant in the U.S. Army, but a real Spit-and-Polish type. His shiny boots and full dress uniform made my old Eisenhower jacket and combat boots look rather shabby.

"Hi," he said. "This is the date of your rank?"

He thought he was going to remain at the place and wanted to make sure he would be in charge, not me. He was obviously relieved when he found that he outranked me.

I was sort of relieved, too. Who wants to be head wadhead at a prison camp, I said to myself.



This is an oil painting of a mess hall done at Camp Newbury in "October" 1945 by a German POW. The outside boilers were used by prisoners to dip in their silverware to sanitize it after leaving the mess hall.

During the daytime, most of the Germans were outside of the stockade at work in the depot.

At the time of their capture, the Germans had been asked this question: Will you agree to work for a small stipend payable in scrip to be redeemed after the war? Those who thought it would be best to be active during their internment said yes. The rest were sent to non-working camps.

Among the POWs at our stockade were crane operators, riggers and other technicians. Their skills were used in moving supplies in and out of the depot.

Inside the stockade, we had Germans who were barbers, tailors, shoe-repairers, watch-ma

Each morning, the Corps of Engineers, the Quartermaster Corps, and other army units would send guard details to the stockade to pick up Germans for work in their section of the depot.

The corporal in charge of the detail presented us with a requisition slip for a specified number of POWs. Before we released the Germans to them, we had him sign a receipt form.

Whoever had composed the receipt form had a macabre sense of humor — or was devoid of it entirely. The form read: "Received (blank number) of live German bodies."

They had to return them to us live, too. Workers at that calibre were not expendable.

When I took over at the stockade, the German camp leader (called the Lager-fuhrer) was a master sergeant who had won the Iron Cross. Later we were sent four German officers, two captains and four lieutenants. One of the captains had been in charge of supplies for a German Army Corps. He took over from the sergeant as leader of the POWs.

The other captain was a doctor, an M.D. He had graduated from Heidelberg University and had the sabre marks on his cheeks to prove it. More about him later.

EACH MORNING, as they left for work in the depot, the POWs marched out of the gate in columns of five. The German Lager-fuhrer stood on one side of the gate, making sure his men were aligned. I stood on the other and counted them out in fives.

He had buried it because at every inspection when he had put his property on the bed, the tobacco had disappeared. The GI guards who made the inspection always stole it.

HIGH ECHELON, at U.S. headquarters in London, kept sending me memos warning that it was dangerous for us to fraternize with the prisoners. I drilled that in my mind, but despite all of my warnings, friendship sprang up between the Americans and Germans.

An American sergeant, who had been in the service for a long time, was getting out on points. When he left for the U.S., the Lager-fuhrer presented him with a gift. It was the Iron Cross that he had risked his neck for in combat.

I would often see my jeep around the race track that enclosed the depot. My purpose was to make sure the guards were on their toes. On more than one occasion, I saw POWs run to warn dozing guards of my approach.

On hot summer days, as I walked inside the stockade, I would often have to throw stones up at the guard towers. That was to keep the guards awake. Guard tower duty is a boring job.

One day, I happened to see an American guard herding 30 POWs into the rear end of a 2 1/2 ton truck. The last of the prisoners had climbed in and taken a seat at the end of the bench. Before he climbed in after the prisoner, the guard held up his rifle for the German to hold.

A few months before, these two men had been trying to kill each other on opposite sides of the line in France.

THE KITCHEN in the stockade was staffed with German cooks. They prepared all of the food the POWs ate. The diet was heavy on potatoes which the Germans seemed to love.

One day we were being inspected by a team of officers sent down by London. When I entered the kitchen with the inspection team, the German mess sergeant and his men snapped briskly to attention. That is, they snapped their heads smartly to the right. Germans never use the hand salute indoors or when the head is not covered.

The team examined the kitchen and the mess hall from top to bottom. As usual, both places were scrupulously clean.

Then a doctor on the team, a major, spotted a large box of lemon crystals on a shelf over the sink. Lemon crystals were one of the two powders issued to our troops by the U.S. Army during World War II. They were to be mixed with water to make a drink, something like Kool-Aid.

In addition to lemon, we got some purple crystals that made a drink the GIs called "bug juice." It was a toupas as to which drink tasted worst, but most of us wouldn't touch either one.

The doctor took the box off the shelf and asked the German sergeant what he used the lemon crystals for.

"Sir," he said, "We use it to scrub the floor."

The Germans couldn't stand the taste of the stuff either.

My living quarters were in a quonset hut not far from the race track grandstand. A room in the grandstand was used as the American mess hall. That's where I took my meals.

One morning we had pancakes for breakfast. I have always been fond of pancakes, but I couldn't eat these. They were one step away from leather. As I looked around the mess hall, I saw that

was adjacent to my orderly room.

I told the interpreter what was wrong and he told the doctor.

The doctor examined my nose and throat and took my temperature. Then he seemed to hesitate. "Finally, he said something to the interpreter. "Sir," the interpreter said to me, "the doctor wants to know if you will take a pill."

I downed the pill and left for my orderly room.

Later, I began to have second thoughts. If the situation had been reversed, I wonder if he would have taken the pill from me?

Our POW stockade was right in the city of Newbury, not out in the countryside. On the way home from school, a few of the local children would stop at the barbed wire fence and talk to the prisoners.

I couldn't permit that, so I phoned the local police station. Two boobies came to visit me. I told them my problem. They offered to make an announcement in the schools that the area was off limits.

Knowing that would attract even more kids, I vetoed the idea. I asked them to just tell the children who had been in the habit of stopping.

Then I decided to attack the problem from the inside. I gave orders that a white line be painted on the ground a few feet inside the wire enclosure.

I got the German commander to announce to the POWs that the area beyond the white line was off limits. Any prisoner who crossed it would be fired on.

I instructed the tower guards to fire a warning shot if they saw any prisoner cross the line.

Two nights later, as I was about the climb into the sack, the sound-powered telephone that connected my quarters with the stockade began to ring.

It was the corporal of the guard, "Lieutenant," he shouted, "We just shot a POW. He was over the white line."

I jumped into my clothes and barreled up to the stockade.

## ... but in spite of all warnings friendships sprang up between the Americans and Germans.



This line-drawing of two POWs also was done by a German prisoner. Behind the tents in the background is a building which was part of the racetrack complex before the war.